

# The American Academy of Religion and the Japanese Association for Religious Studies

## *A Report on the “Focus on Japan” at the 2003 AAR in Atlanta*

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THE NANZAN INSTITUTE for Religion and Culture was established as a research center in 1974. Through the years it has published widely in the area of religious studies, including the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, a number of series of books on Asian religions in Western languages and in Japanese, and a series of books in Japanese with the contents of symposiums conducting interreligious dialogue. The Institute is also active in supporting inter-religious organizations and networks such as the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, CORMOS (Conference on Religion and Modern Society), and Inter-religio.

The ideal of the Nanzan Institute is for a relatively small number of scholars to work together intimately in close cooperation to promote dialogue through academic research. Thus, for many years, as an Institute we focused on working closely with small groups such as the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and its Japanese counterpart, the Tōzai Shūkyō Kōryū Gakkai, as well as the Inter-Religio network in East Asia, rather than through large organizations such as the Japanese Association for Religious Studies (JARS) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR), though as individuals we were involved in various large academic societies.

The involvement of Professor Ikado Fujio, former President (1996–1999) of the JARS, played a significant role in encouraging the Institute to become more actively involved in larger organizations of the religious studies world. Soon after Ikado's election as President of the JARS in 1996, then-director James Heisig discussed with Ikado the possibility of hosting the JARS annual conference at Nanzan in the near future, along with introducing international elements and structural changes in the JARS program. In the fall of 1997 Ikado was invited to give a colloquium at the Nanzan Institute. On that occasion, Ikado unofficially suggested that Nanzan sponsor the annual conference of the JARS in the near future, and also encouraged us to utilize the Nanzan Institute's experience to not only add a more

international character to the JARS but also to introduce some structural innovations to the JARS program, such as topical panel discussions. The suggestion was timely, as 1999 was a special year for Nanzan. Not only did it mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the founding of Nanzan University, but also the 25<sup>th</sup> year since the founding of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. The convergence of special anniversaries also provided an opportunity to involve the cooperation of Nanzan University as a whole, including substantial financial support.

*International Symposium on “New Trends in Religious Studies”*

The staff of the Nanzan Institute immediately began to make plans for holding the 1999 JARS annual conference at Nanzan, and to discuss ways to provide an international dimension at this meeting. James Heisig, Paul Swanson, and Okuyama Michiaki took advantage of their attendance at the November 1997 AAR annual meeting in San Francisco to meet with Barbara DeConcini, at the time President of the AAR, who kindly took time from her hectic schedule to discuss our still half-baked ideas and vague ambitions, and to provide valuable advice on possible cooperation with the AAR. Paul Swanson then traveled to Wabash College to discuss the matter with Raymond Williams, who suggested contacting and working through the AAR International Connections Committee.

The following spring (1998), Paul Swanson was invited to attend the AAR International Connections Committee meeting in Atlanta as an observer to learn about the current situation within the AAR with regard to international issues, and received valuable advice from the ICC chair Dr. Jacob Olupana (University of California-Davis) and ICC member Lawrence Sullivan (Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions). Paul Swanson and Watanabe Manabu attended the AAR conference in Orlando (1998) and were able to have fruitful discussions with the then AAR President Margaret Miles and former President Lawrence Sullivan, resulting in concrete decisions concerning the people we would invite to Japan, and the theme of our 1999 Symposium. Thus a long and complicated process, involving many people, finally began to bear fruit.

Thanks to the efforts and planning of many people, the 1999 annual conference of the JARS was held at Nanzan. Instead of the usual commemorative lecture by a single notable individual on the opening day of the conference, an international Symposium was held, with Margaret Miles, Lawrence Sullivan, and David Carrasco invited to represent the AAR, and Tsuchiya Hiroshi, Takezawa Shōichirō, and Kanai Shimji representing the JARS. More than 300 people attended the symposium, with papers and discussion on the theme “Recent Trends in Religious Studies.” The papers and responses were assembled and translated in advance, and printed in book form in both English and Japanese, allowing the participants to

give their oral presentations without intrusive simultaneous translation, and making possible the full participation by all in the fruitful discussion that followed, resulting in a successful international symposium.

On the final day of the JARS conference we held a discussion concerning possible future cooperation between the members of the JARS and AAR. At that time the AAR representatives expressed a strong interest in involving Japanese scholars in the AAR and organizing a reciprocal event. Of course, this was a most welcome development and, as members of both the JARS and AAR, the staff of the Nanzan Institute expressed our willingness and desire to further promote cooperation between the two organizations.

In the fall of the same year, Margaret Miles appointed Watanabe Manabu to the International Connections Committee, resulting ultimately in his direct involvement in promoting relations between Japanese and American scholars of religion for eight years. The first ICC meeting he attended (in spring 2000) also involved the start of Mary McGee's tenure as chair of the committee and marked the beginning of a new activism by the committee. The internationalization of religious studies was also considered important for the AAR by many of its members, and the cooperation with Japan provided an opportunity to pursue this goal. The AAR moved to institutionalize this goal, and a proposal to incorporate an international focus for each annual meeting, beginning with Toronto in 2002, was approved by the AAR board, at the initiative of Mary McGee. Our actions from Japan, in effect, served as a catalyst to encourage the internationalization of the AAR.

It was only later that we realized that these movements were exceptional for the AAR. That is, until recently the members of the ICC were all scholars residing in the United States (including the "international" members). In this sense, Margaret Miles's decision to appoint Watanabe, a resident of Japan, was a new precedent. Despite the geographical distance, Watanabe attended all eight ICC meetings between 2000 and 2003, without missing a single one.

Before 2002, the AAR had never identified a certain international perspective with an annual meeting. In response to the 1999 JARS events, the AAR moved to organize a "focus on Japan" associated with an AAR annual meeting. However, as a first step the ICC decided to invite Japanese scholars to a "special topic forum," and Watanabe was asked to organize this event.

*The Special Topic Forum on  
"Religion and Society after the Aum Affair" (Denver 2001)*

As a preparation for the "Focus on Japan," the International Connections Committee sponsored a special topics forum on "Religion and Society after the Aum Affair" and invited Japanese scholars for the annual meeting in Denver in 2001. As

it turned out, this meeting took place in the aftermath of a series of tragic events, such as the multiple terrorist attacks of 9.11, the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, and the airplane accident in New York in the middle of November. The situation presented serious problems for international travelers. Even some members of the ICC residing in the United States, having lost faith in the safety of air travel, decided not to attend the AAR annual meeting.

Despite the situation, we were gratified that the members of the special topic forum made a special effort to participate. Mark Mullins, Robert Kisala, Sakurai Yoshihide, and Watanabe Manabu attended from Japan, and Catherine Wessinger (Loyola University) and Irving Hexham (Calgary University) participated from North America. The topic of “religion and terrorism” turned out to be quite timely, and the session had a large attendance and inspired a lively discussion. The issue of how society changes in response to such a situation was one that had new meaning and significance for American scholars, and the Japanese scholars were able to reflect on and analyze in detail the changes in Japanese society over six years since the terrorism of the Aum affair.

### *Preparing for the “Focus on Japan”*

After Denver, the intent of the ICC was to sponsor the “Focus on Japan” at the 2002 annual meeting. Since the annual meeting was scheduled to be held in Toronto, however, plans were shifted so that the Toronto meeting could provide a focus on the contributions of Canadian scholars, and the focus on Japan could become a part of the 2003 annual meeting scheduled for Atlanta.

To help the Japanese participants prepare for possible participation in the AAR, Watanabe published a detailed description of the AAR annual meeting in the December 2002 (no. 334) issue of *Shūkyō kenkyū* (the quarterly journal of the JARS), including an explanation of the structure of AAR panels and topical groups. In January 2004 the Nanzan Institute sponsored two meetings to provide guidance concerning participation in the AAR, and an opportunity for people to gather and share their plans for papers and/or panels. Over 30 people attended these meetings, with many plans for panels were developed, and valuable information exchanged. Many of the scholars whose proposals were eventually accepted by the AAR were participants of these meetings.

### *The “Focus on Japanese Scholars and Scholarship” (Atlanta 2003)*

The 2003 AAR annual conference was held from 22 to 26 November at Atlanta, Georgia, in tandem with the Society of Biblical Literature. The AAR is a large-scale organization with a membership of over 9,000, and over 8,000 people registered



1. Barbara DeConcini presents a gift to Shimazono Susumu at the lunch reception.

for attending the Atlanta conference. A theme of this conference was “Focus on Japanese Scholars and Scholarship.” About 90 Japanese scholars have membership in the AAR, and of these about 40 participated in the Atlanta meetings, resulting in a memorable conference.

In response to the International Symposium sponsored by Nanzan in 1999, the AAR invited three official guests from Japan to the Atlanta conference, including Shimazono Susumu, the President of the JARS. A special lunch reception was held in



2. Participants in the lunch reception for scholars from Japan.



3. Shimazono Susumu, Mary McGee, and Robert Orsi.

the AAR suite room, at which Dr. Shimazono was presented with a gift in honor of the occasion (photos 1–3). Mary McGee, representing the AAR as the chair of the International Connections Committee, gave a welcoming speech in which she recognized the initiative of the JARS in bringing about the exchange between the Japanese and US organizations, and praised it as a model for the ongoing internationalization of the AAR. She stressed the importance of the internationalization project and expressed

a strong hope that cooperation between the two countries and organizations will continue to grow. These words indicated the intention that we would meet again at the IAHR conference in Tokyo in 2005.

In response, Shimazono thanked the AAR for its good will, and extended a special invitation for participation by many American scholars in the 2005 conference. A gift was also presented to Watanabe in recognition of his many years of dedicated service to make these events possible.

### *The Goals of the “Focus on Japan” and Related Panels*

It can be said that there were two major goals for the “Focus on Japan.” The first was to organize panels that involved many Japanese scholars, and the second was to have many Japanese scholars participate in a variety of panels in many different areas, thus actively encouraging cooperation between the Japanese and American academic societies. As it turned out, there were also many panels which had Japan as its theme even without the participation of any Japanese scholars. All together there were at least 12 panels.

A chronological listing of some of these panels, including the names of those from Japan who gave a paper or served as a respondent or chair, are as follows (the names are listed without titles and without indicating their nationality or membership in the AAR). Included are the themes of the panels, and the group that sponsored the panel.

**November 22 (Sat.)**

*Recent Research on Japanese Religions and Society* (Japanese Religions group)

Miyamoto Yuki

*The Kyoto School in Dialogue with the West* (co-sponsored by Philosophy of Religion section and Continental Philosophy group)

Tsuruoka Yoshio, James Heisig

*Communication, Public Arenas, Secularity, and the Quest of Modern Culture* (Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion group)

Horie Norichika

**November 23 (Sun.)**

*Religious Studies in a Japanese Context* (International Connections Committee Special Topics Forum)

Hayashi Makoto, Nakano Tsuyoshi, Nomura Fumiko, Shimazono Susumu, Paul Swanson, Watanabe Manabu

*Myth-Understanding: Categories, Controversies, and Cross-Cultural Concerns* (Comparative Studies in Religion Section)

Yamanaka Hiroshi, Kimura Takeshi

*Christianity in Japan: Conflicting Experiences* (History of Christianity section)

Dorothea Magdalena Filus, Higashibaba Ikuo, Fumitaka Matsuoka, Mark Mullins, Mira Sonntag

*Revisiting Authenticity Discourses in Japanese Religious Renewal Movements: Theory and a Descent to Cases* (Japanese Religions group)

Matsubara Kakuju

*Distance: Screening and Conversation with Director Kore-eda* (Religion, Film, and Visual Culture group)

Kore-eda Hirokazu, Okuyama Michiaki, Paul Swanson

**November 24 (Mon.)**

*Public Relations and Growth Strategies in New Religious Movements in Japan* (Japanese Religions group and New Religious Movements group)

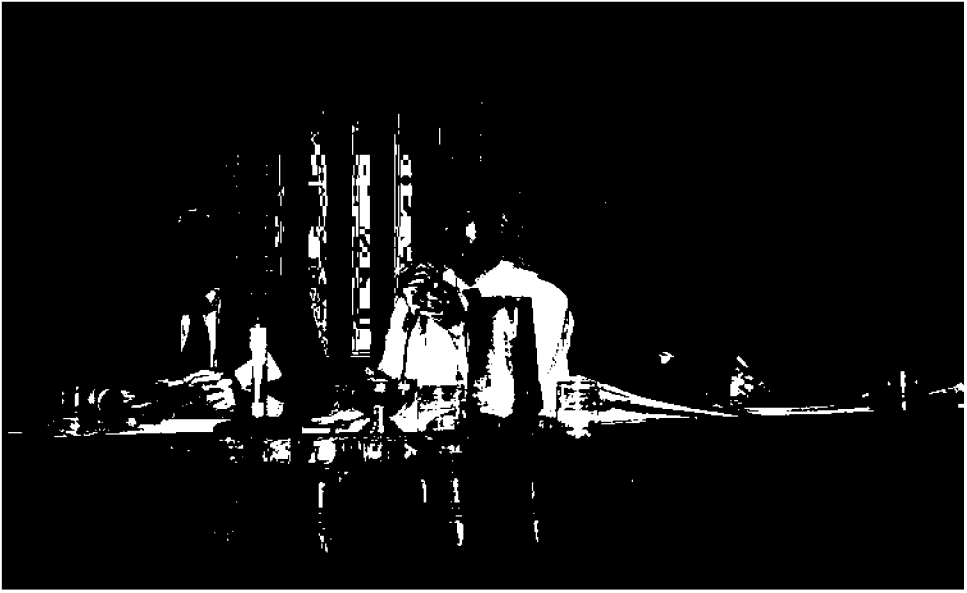
Ben Dorman, Robert Kisala, Ian Reader, Morishita Saburō, Sakurai Yoshihide, Watanabe Manabu (photos 4–5)

*Monotheism vs. Polytheism? East Asian Views on Religions and Environmental Ethics* (Religion, Ethics, and Society in Contemporary East Asia consultation)

Dake Mitsuya, Kohara Katsuhiko, Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya, Sawai Yoshitsugu, Klaus Spennemann

*Japanese American Immigrants and Religion in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Asian North American Religion, Culture, and Society Group)

Brian Masaru Hayashi, Moriya Tomoe



4. Watanabe, Sakurai, and Reader on a Japanese Religions panel.

*Response to Modernity: Interactions between Japanese and European Scholarship on Buddhism* (Cultural History of the Study of Religion consultation, co-sponsored by the ICC)

Sasaki Shizuka (attendance canceled at the last minute, but paper read in abstentia), Shimoda Masahiro



5. Watanabe, Kisala, Swanson, and Reader after a Japanese Religions panel.



Thus there were over 30 participants from Japan. There were also many participants from the US who are deeply involved in academic societies and research in Japan. Here is a partial list based on the names listed in the AAR program (our apologies to anyone we have overlooked): James Ford (Wake Forest University), Paula Arai (Carleton College), Ruben Habito (Southern Methodist University), Yusa Michiko (Western Washington University), John Maraldo (North Florida University), Thomas Kasulis (Ohio State University), William Paden (University of Vermont), Mark Wheeler MacWilliams (St. Lawrence University), Gary Ebersole (Missouri University), Ian Reader (Lancaster University), Mary Evelyn Tucker (Bucknell University), Duncan Williams (University of California-Irvine).



An important part of the “Focus on Japan” was the Special Topics Forum sponsored by the International Connections Committee on the theme “Religious Studies in a Japanese Context” (photos 6–8). This event was organized in response to the international symposium on “Recent Trends in Religious Studies” held at Nanzan University in 1999. The panel met at 9:00 am on Sunday morning (23 Nov), and despite the early hour, the room was filled with over 60 participants, including AAR president Robert Orsi and former AAR president Margaret Miles.

Mary McGee, chair of the International Connections Committee, opened the session with greetings and an explanation of the exchanges between the US and Japanese associations, and Shimazono Susumu, president of the JARS, provided an overview and new perspective on the history of religious studies in Japan. Then Watanabe, as the general coordinator, gave an overview of the session. The academic study of religion in Japan was institutionalized when the Imperial Univer-



6. The Special Topics Forum panel sponsored by the ICC.



7. The panelists at the Special Topics Forum.

sity of Tokyo established the first chair in religious studies in 1905. Unlike the West, religious studies in Japan did not develop from a background in, or in response to, Christian theology. How, then, did religious studies develop in Japan? How did the Japanese socio-cultural environment influence its development? How does the academic study of religion in Japan relate to Buddhology and other academic fields, and to its Western counterparts? Are there any Japanese contributions to the field of religious studies in general? This panel was an attempt to reflect on the field of religious studies in Japan, and to provide a forum for discussing the internationalization of religious studies.

The first panelist, Nomura Fumiko, spoke on the theme “Religion and Gender in the Japanese Context.” In the course of introducing her own work and that of



8. Nomura, Swanson, Hayashi, Nakano, and Shimazono, at the Special Topics Forum panel.

other Japanese scholars, she briefly outlined the contents of the recent publication by Kawahashi Noriko and Kuroki Masako, eds., "Feminism and Religion in Contemporary Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 30/3-4 (Fall 2003).

Next, Hayashi Makoto gave a paper on "Buddhist Studies and Religious Studies in Modern Japan," showing the development of the study of religion at universities in modern Japan, and discussing how the institutional basis of Buddhist studies influenced the development of religious studies. According to Hayashi, modern Buddhist studies in Japan began with the establishment of chairs on Indian philosophy at Imperial universities during the Taisho era (early twentieth century), and sectarian Buddhist universities were established later. Thus, in the Japanese context, religious studies developed as the study of religions other than Buddhism. This characteristic of religious studies in Japan received much attention, and resulted in numerous questions from the floor.

Third, Nakano Tsuyoshi gave a detailed paper on the theme "Science or Humanities? Development and Issues of Empirical Studies of Religion in Japan." Nakano pointed out that, ever since the first chair on religious studies was established at the Imperial University of Tokyo, the study of religion in Japan has been regarded as a modern "science." As a result, religious studies in Japan are characterized by the following points. (1) There has been an intimate and cooperative relationship between the various fields of social sciences in Japan, more than in the West, which has brought about fruitful results. (2) On the other hand, this has resulted in a broad inclusiveness (*furoshiki-shugi*, "wrapping-cloth principle") such that a large variety of fields, including theology, sectarian studies, and philosophy of religion, are all included within "religious studies." (3) Thus, even under the official banner of "religious studies as science," there was a strong sense of skepticism toward the scientific method from the very beginning, and its methodological identity (is religious studies a "science" or not?) was never firmly established. (4) Since "religious studies" was imported, with strong backing from the government, as part of the unavoidable modernization and Westernization of Japan, it did not develop (as in the West) in a context of conflict or competition with pre-existing religious traditions or theology and sectarian studies. (5) there was strong opinion even among scholars of religion in Japan that traditional religions and religious cultures in Japan had intrinsically different values and forms from those of Protestantism in Europe and the United States, for example, which were based on an individual's "belief in God," and this opinion appeared early on as part of the cultural nationalism of Japan. Finally, Nakano pointed out that the "Aum Affair" had resulted in a methodological identity crisis for scholars of religion in Japan, much like the effect of 9.11 on religious studies in the United States.

After the presentation of the papers, William Paden (University of Vermont) and Paul Swanson responded with questions and comments. Paden, based on his methodology of comparative research, presented a clear structure for comparing



9. Kore-eda Hirokazu discusses his film after the showing of *Distance*.

the different perspectives of religious studies in the West and in Japan, providing the audience with a useful tool for reflecting on the papers. Swanson provided concise and specific comments and questions on each of the papers, breaking the ice for further questions from the audience.

Other events of note include the showing of the film *Distance*. Okuyama Michiaki and Paul Swanson of the Nanzan Institute arranged for a grant from The Japan Foundation to cover the costs of the rights to show the film and for the director, Kore-eda Hirokazu, to attend and take part in a spirited discussion after the show-



10. An informal discussion with Kore-eda Hirokazu that continued late into the night.

ing of the film. More than 70 people attended the film, and Kore-eda responded to a wide variety of queries and discussions concerning the background to, and his intentions and methodology in making the film (photos 9–10).

Another memorable event was the Saturday evening “Focus on Japan” reception co-sponsored by the Nanzan Institute and the University of Hawai‘i Press. The reception turned out to be a lively event, attended not only by the people involved in the Japan Focus events, but also by an invited representative from the Japanese Consulate in Atlanta, scholars involved in Japanese and Buddhist studies, and many other friends (photo 11).

### *Thanks and Acknowledgments*

We would like to thank the University of Hawai‘i Press for not only co-sponsoring the “Focus on Japan” reception, but also providing room in their booth to display information on religious studies in Japan, pamphlets for the upcoming IAHR in Tokyo, and posters advertising events such as the showing of *Distance*.

We would also like to express our thanks and appreciation to the AAR for its openness and cooperation in making the Focus on Japan a great success, in particular, to AAR President Robert Orsi, AAR Executive Director and former President Barbara DeConcini, former President Margaret Miles, Director of Operations John Harrison, and ICC chair Mary McGee. Without their active support, such a splendid and successful menagerie of events would not have been possible.

The Atlanta conference was also a great success thanks to the many participants from Japan. We believe that many people experienced this conference as a note-



11. Guests at the “Focus on Japan” reception.

worthy moment in the history of cooperation between Japanese and American scholars.

In closing we would like to express our appreciation again to Professor Ikado Fujio for his role in encouraging cooperation between Japanese and American academic societies; to Shimazono Susumu and Kore-eda Hirokazu, who attended the conference despite their extremely busy schedules; to Oda Yoshiko, chair of the JARS International Affairs Committee, who took time from her year-long sabbatical in Turkey to attend the AAR conference, and to the many people whose names we cannot all list but contributed in so many ways to the success of the conference.

### *In Closing*

As a result of the events outlined above, the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture was able to expand its previous involvement in small-scale organizations such as Inter-religio and the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, where a small group of 10–30 people interact on a deep and personal level, to become more actively involved in large-scale academic societies such as the JARS and AAR, which involve thousands of participants. It can be said that this project to encourage cooperation between Japanese and American organizations has added a new dimension to the work of the Institute.

As the next step in this direction, the Nanzan Institute is deeply involved in planning for the XIXth World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR) to be held in Tokyo in 2005. In retrospect, the negotiations with the AAR turned out to be a valuable training ground for the current planning for the IAHR congress.

The Institute has also received a three-year Japanese government grant to pursue a project on “International and Comparative Research on Cooperation Between Research Institutes to Promote the Internationalization of Religious Studies.” Our project to promote cooperation between Japanese and American academic societies is now expanding to include religious studies research in all areas of the world, including Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America (see our home page at [www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/projects/](http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/projects/)). By promoting such ties among research institutes around the world, we hope to realize further progress in the internationalization of religious studies.

*Note: This essay is based on a report on the Atlanta AAR annual meeting submitted in Japanese to the JARS journal Shūkyō kenkyū 77/3, no. 338 (2003), pp. 193–99 (727–33).*

*[translated by Paul L. Swanson]*